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POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

REVIEWS

THE FLOATING WORLD

Pictures of the Floating World, by Amy Lowell. Macmillan Co.

Some poets, though as secretive as a huge, sun-browned desert rock, convey mysteriously to the reader an impression of their closeness to earth, the solid integrity of their being. Others, like a lake volatile, brilliant, temperamental, express all moods from gray mist to rainbow sparkles, and leave us wondering. Of this latter category is Miss Lowell. She glitters, splashes, dazzles, assumes veils of mist, reflects stars, gleams black under a midnight sky, or pink with dawn, yet what, after all, do we know of "the real" Amy Lowell? Is there one? We gaze through layer after layer of transparency into problematical depths, but we never see bottom. There is no dimensional quality in her poetry which says: "This is the real essence of me. This is the height of my emotion, this its depth. These are the proportions of my spirit." We are forced to take Miss Lowell as she presents herself in her book, a liquid mirror to beauty.

However, these *Pictures of the Floating World* contain one section, *Two Speak Together*, which is unquestionably the most emotional and intimate work Miss Lowell has done. They are love poems, arranged according to a scheme of balanced intensities. There seems to be no narrative sequence; though, perplexed and troubled by their poignant beauty, one seeks a plot in the poems. But Miss Lowell is

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elusive as ever. She leaves us to our own devices, to make from her group what we will, without a clue to unravel them. One re-reads them in vain, seeking to disentangle the personalities of the "Two" who speak together, resigning himself at last to leave them quite undistinguished. And hence arises a cloudiness which obscures not only their genesis but their appeal. But the genuineness of their emotion is so unmistakable that one is forced to allow the poet to transpose it from one sex to another, from one speaker to another, at her will. Miss Lowell uses an infinite variety of colors, of delicate shapes and contours, of dissolving gestures and light clear sounds as vehicles of emotion. Her nerves quiver to the slightest stimulus, her feeling for light, sound and color is highly sensitive.

The first poem of this group, *Vernal Equinox*, well illustrates this delicacy of perception:

The scent of hyacinths, like a pale mist, lies between me and my
book:
And the South-wind, washing through the room,
Makes the candles quiver.
My nerves sting at a spatter of rain on the shutter,
And I am uneasy with the thrusting of green shoots
Outside in the night.

Why are you not here to overpower me with your tense and urgent
love?

Another one is called *Wheel of the Sun*:

I beg you,
Hide your face from me.
Draw the tissue of your head-gear
Over your eyes.

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For I am blinded by your beauty,
And my heart is strained,
And aches
Before you.

In the street,
You spread a brightness where you walk,
And I see your lifting silks
And rejoice;
But I cannot look at your face.
You melt my strength,
And set my knees to trembling.
Shadow yourself that I may love you,
For now it is too great a pain.

There is a poignancy of imagery in *November*:

The vine-leaves against the brick walls of my house
Are rusty and broken.
Dead leaves gather under the pine-trees,
The brilliant boughs of lilac-bushes
Sweep against the stars.
And I sit under a lamp
Trying to write down the emptiness of my heart.
Even the cat will not stay with me,
But prefers the rain
Under the meager shelter of a cellar window.

First in the book, but second in importance to the group I have just considered, come the *Lacquer Prints*. They are fashioned after Japanese models in a "quasi-oriental idiom," are carefully wrought, highly polished, and sometimes a little hard. Although it is a form of poetry that Miss Lowell does superlatively well, her treatment does not differ very greatly from that of several other poets who "do the *hokku* into English." It is a much over-rated form, fit to be the vehicle of only the tiniest facets of emotion. Its great charm, when well done, is that the economy of its

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image releases the imagination of the reader to fill in the picture with something to him significant. It is ruined by too great rigidity, by a too-conventional imagination, or a lifeless subject. Miss Lowell has written some of these tiny poems which carry magic with every word. The hushed waiting, the delicate, silent piling-up of the flowers in *Outside a Gate* enchant the reader:

On the floor of the empty palanquin
The plum-petals constantly increase.

Another lovely one is *Autumn*:

All day I have watched the purple vine-leaves
Fall into the water;
And now in the moonlight they still fall,
But each leaf is fringed with silver.

A beautiful picture of light is in *Nuit Blanche*:

The chirping of crickets in the night
Is intermittent
Like the twinkling of stars.

Miss Lowell is a writer of indefatigable energy. With passionate curiosity she has explored every corner of her own subtle and intricate personality, and from this subjective material and her vivid reactions to beauty she has made her best poems. As an interpreter she is not so successful, for she is essentially an individualist. *Appuldurcombe Park* is perhaps the least effective, the least beautiful poem in the book. The reiteration of the statement, "I am a woman, sick for passion," which begins each of the four long stanzas, is unconvincing and repellent. When women are "sick for passion" we may say it of them, but scarcely

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put the words into their mouths. The psychology of the poem is weak. Miss Lowell is an intellectual, and does not penetrate far into personalities alien to her own. Her greatest achievement is in descriptive poetry, into which she puts that flash of subjective emotion so characteristic of her best work. For instance, *Beech, Pine and Sunlight*:

The sudden April heat
Stretches itself
Under the smooth, leafless branches
Of the beech-tree,
And lies lightly
Upon the great patches
Of purple and white crocus
With their panting, wide-open cups.

A clear wind
Slips through the naked beech boughs,
And their shadows scarcely stir.
But the pine-trees beyond sigh
When it passes over them
And presses back their needles,
And slides gently down their stems.
It is a languor of pale, south-starting sunlight
Come upon a morning unawakened,
And holding her drowsing.

Miss Lowell's poems have not mass, solidity, proportion. They are not architectural. One is not tempted to take them into one's hands and *feel* them, as one might a sculptured object. Yet they are more than decorative. They could not be hung upon the wall like pictures, because, though nine-tenths of the poem may be a picture, one line or a word will be a needle of emotion, a shock of electricity, which makes the thing glow and move. We do not get from Miss Lowell a feeling of intimacy with earth, by which

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I mean human life, of close, warm interpretation. She is rather like the lake; brilliant, mirror-like, responsive, contained within shores of an alien substance, an alien element, which it touches, reflects, beats upon, but with which it cannot mingle.

M. A. S.

WALEY'S TRANSLATIONS FROM THE CHINESE

A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems, and More Translations from the Chinese, by Arthur Waley. Alfred A. Knopf.

The increasing influence of Chinese art, and especially of Chinese poetry, makes these labors of Mr. Waley singularly opportune; for, while previous translators—like H. A. Giles, L. Cranmer-Byng and Judith Gautier—have spurred us into the subject, Mr. Waley is at once more exact and, as a rule, more instinctively sympathetic.

The traveller in China encounters with some surprise the wistful, half-pitying humor which pervades Chinese art, and learns before long that it is fundamental in Chinese character. In paintings and carvings, and even in the most dignified sacred architecture and sculpture, one detects almost always a faint, half-pitying smile—that slight flavor of the grotesque through which the oriental acknowledges the strangeness of our fate. One finds this in Sung paintings: the cataract and the mountain are there, simplified almost to a symbol of grandeur; but somewhere in the corner a small twisted and squinting philosopher expresses the little-